

Interview with Joseph Nechvatal by Elsa Ayache 12/16/2006 Paris
on painting in the digital era
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Joseph Nechvatal: le grand écart numérique de la peinture
by Elsa Ayache

Art et histoire de l'art. Université Michel de Montaigne - Bordeaux III



Joseph Nechvatal, *elegic hermaphrO gustO* (2006) 44x66"

Elsa Ayache: You are:

Joseph Nechvatal: An American artist living in Paris and New York City

Elsa Ayache: And born in:

Joseph Nechvatal: Chicago, Illinois

Elsa Ayache: What would be the best words to define your status and profession?

Joseph Nechvatal: Since 1986 I have been worked with electronic visual information, computers and computer-robotics. My computer-robotic assisted paintings and computer software animations are shown regularly in galleries and museums throughout the world. From 1991-1993 I worked as artist-in-resident at the Louis Pasteur Atelier and the Saline Royale / Ledoux Foundation's computer lab in Arbois, France on The Computer Virus Project: an experiment with computer viruses as a creative stratagem. In 2002 I extended that artistic research into the field of viral artificial life through my collaboration with the programmer Stéphane Sikora.

I earned my Ph.D. in the philosophy of art and new technology at The Centre for Advanced Inquiry in the Interactive Arts (CAiiA) University of Wales College, Newport, UK where I served as conference coordinator for the 1st International CAiiA Research Conference entitled Consciousness Reframed: Art and Consciousness in the Post-Biological Era (July 1997); an international conference which looked at new developments in art, science, technology and consciousness. I presently teach art and art theory at the School of Visual Arts in New York City (SVA) and at Stevens Institute of Technology.

Elsa Ayache: What is your formation?

Joseph Nechvatal: I took a BFA at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale and I then went to Cornell University with the idea of getting an MFA, but found the art department there years behind Southern Illinois University. So I left and went to New York and Columbia University where I worked towards an MPhil, studying with Arthur Danto, most notably. In the late 90s I earned a Ph.D. in the philosophy of art and new technology at Roy Ascott's Centre for Advanced Inquiry in the Interactive Arts (CAiiA) at The University of Wales College. That was a fantastic intellectual experience. My research was focused on the immersive ideals behind virtual reality. You can examine the introduction and download the full thesis as a pdf file at <http://www.eyewithwings.net/nechvatal/ideals.htm> if you wish.

Elsa Ayache: How could you define what your art practice is about?

Joseph Nechvatal: My art often is a matter of visualizing aesthetic sensations linked to technological and sexual concepts. It is essentially a mental prosthetic for both the perfunctory machinic and the luxurious corporal domain. Through the use of computational power coupled with human delicacy, feelings of ebullient exultation, deep grief, and spectral serenity are conveyed in computer-robotic assisted paintings.

Of late, I have been working more on the theme of hermaphroditism in my art - in parallel with the viral. For me the hermaphroditic sign serves as emblem of the variance that characterizes virtualism. In an age of networked incredulity, where hierarchies are put into crises by the digital, the hermaphrodite becomes the harbinger of new creative territories by flickering between static boundaries.

The function of my computer-robotic assisted painting is to create, by extenuation, different technological-aesthetic percepts. More specifically, my recent computer-robotic assisted paintings are an investigation into the sphere of the pan-sexual under the conditions of what I call "viractuality" (occasions where the virtual and the actual merge) - circumstances which are not quite historically conditioned yet. To do this, my computer-robotic assisted paintings focus on an interface between the virtual and the actual (the viractual) by putting the classical canvas in confrontation with informatics.

Elsa Ayache: Which are the most frequent plastic operations you are using in your practice?

Joseph Nechvatal: First, I very much like to work with the digital in its predominant visual form, the immaterial abstract information of pixels and I like very much the world wide transportable dimension of the Internet, where the digital data-stream travels at the speed of light - but I also like to see a large-scaled semblance just sitting still on an unchanging canvas so I can silently reflect on it and move within the work in natural light at my leisure with customary unrestrictions to my bodily movements.

With the increased augmentation of the self via micro-electronics feasible today, the real may co-exist with the virtual and the organic fuse with the computer-robotic. Consequently, I am interested in a new interlaced sense of artistic viractuality which couples the biological with the technological and the stable canvas with the ephemeral digital.

The work's extensive ornate excess attempts to give to us an expansive metaphor for our computational condition - our state of digital-assisted being. In the rising and collapsing of

alternative sexual visualizations and unordered revelations seen in the work, the circuits of the mind may find a dexterity exactly congruent with the viractual's configuration.

Elsa Ayache: According to you, what could be the conditions sine qua non for the painting to exist?

Joseph Nechvatal: Still painting (pigment on a flat surface) must persist in our age of fluid propaganda.

But, my viractual computer-robotic assisted paintings strive for a depiction of an anti-essentiality of the body-in-bits which allows no privileged sexual logos, but insists, rather, on a displacement or deferral of meaning. Here images of the flesh are further undone by viral disturbances they cannot contain. This viral-viractual-visual situation creates ribald opportunities for transgressions of conventional erotic limitations. In the work's pan-sexual interlacement, aphrodisiac thought detaches itself from the order and authority of the old signs and topples down into the realm of viractual reverie.

This pan-sexual viractual contemplation is certainly the most erudite area of our unconsciousness - as it is the deep down depth from which we beings emerged into our precarious, but glittering, existence

Elsa Ayache: Could you give some homonyms for "painting"?

Joseph Nechvatal: No

Elsa Ayache: Do you make special links in your work between painting and digital¹ or do you feel they are two different practices and ways to create?

Joseph Nechvatal: For me, the digital has brought back from the dead the practice of painting. It has made it alive. It has made it bloom in the enthusiastic and relevant sense of the word *alive* - but it has made painting alive in a more specific sense also, as I began mixing my digital painting practice with techniques of artificial life (a-life). Therefore, the digital as applied to painting excites me - and this excitement allows me to work with passion. A curious alliance: the cold impersonality of technology with the heat of ecstasy.

I am excited to work with digital painting - which I have now been doing for 19 years - because certainly it is true that hidden in connected computer space, there is something so large, so astounding, and so pregnant with the darkness of infinite space that it excites and

frightens us and thus returns us to the experimental and to a state of stimulating desire if we do not turn from it in fear.

Elsa Ayache: *How do you explore the digital technology in your art practice? Would you have any example(s) in your art works that use digital to detail here?*

Joseph Nechvatal: My current chain of history paintings called *the new nOOLology* are based on a fraction of the infamous digital photos from the Abu Graib abuse scandal. As such, they present embedded images of American torture. Here American detainees are punished and humiliated and then adorned through an a-life process of viral attack laden with the latent content of ambiguous bioterror. These digital computer-robotic acrylic paintings link together systems of exposed nerves with the torture at Abu Graib - now festooned with miniature hermaphrodites infected by viral attacks that undermine them. For me they are an attempt at expressing America's deep demoralization. They are moral acts then, free with the truth of our penchant for desire. As such, these paintings contribute slightly to the downfall of the present reality in that they bury visual memory at the outset.

Elsa Ayache: *Can that work be assimilated to a painting practice? Why?*

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes, because digital painting is a precise reaction to critical things as they are now in the hyperactive information age while maintaining the position of reflective criticality found in the long tradition of silent and immobile painted surfaces.

Elsa Ayache: *For you, is the computer a medium or a tool? Why?*

Joseph Nechvatal: Both. In 1987 Deleuze and Guattari decoded for me the tradition of painting and proposed another tack. A tack which leads from and back to Artaud's Body-without-Organs, to swarms and rhizomes, to processes of de-territorialization and reterritorialization through the virtual - to desiring cyborg machines and visual lines of flight. They enhanced my general conviction that painting is first-rate when it brings compound conceptual abstractions into the perceptual stage - where the result really is an embodiment of real yet abstract forces. They made it clear that painting must reflect the digital if it is to be other than a stinking cadaver. Painting must be digital to be, as Susan Sontag wrote in *Against Interpretation*, "a new kind of instrument, an instrument for modifying consciousness and organizing new modes of sensibility" because our consciousness and sensibility is now largely

now molded by the virtual.

Elsa Ayache: Which software do you use?

Joseph Nechvatal: My custom C++ virus software, Photoshop, Word, others. The basic rule is, where information can go, a virus can go with it

Elsa Ayache: Which are the most frequent tools and operations you work with?

Joseph Nechvatal: My C++ virus software.

Elsa Ayache: For which goal?

Joseph Nechvatal: For me, the power of the abstracting force of ideology in distributed information continues to be of critical interest and continues to supply my digital painting practice with its motivational urgency. In that we live in the information age, the essential abstract political feature now is electronic reiteration and its role in creating psychological viruses (memes) within our culture. In that sense, my post-conceptual digital painting is a virtual dada in its subjectivist approach towards ideology (including the rules and ideology behind the practice of traditional painting) within the field of reproductive technology. My practice and craft is post-Postmodern (what I call *viractual*) because it paradoxically defends Modernism as well as it celebrates the radical plurality of a form of knowing that is undeniably characteristic of contemporary electronics. This adherence to the electronic/digital now rejects the relativism that postmodernists insist upon and lends the work a formal consistency that is indicative of modernism. Specifically, this intentional stance defends modernism's tradition of valuing the opticality of flatness that was established in America just after World War II.

Elsa Ayache: What are the issues that annoy you the most during your practice?

Joseph Nechvatal: Issues of the state of technical and formal completion which turns our attention away the conceptual subject matter of the paintings.

Elsa Ayache: Which role does play the spectator's "look"?

Joseph Nechvatal: The looker must be mentally active. The looker must be looking into and projecting onto my digital paintings - thereby discovering emerging images - as opposed to looking AT something. In that sense it requires an active participation on the part of the viewer.

For me, this required user participation is essential in our climate of mass media (mass-think). Art's complex ambiguity is valuable as it strengthens our unique personal powers of imagination and critical thinking so as to counter the effects of our age of simplification (Minimal Art) - effects which have resulted from the glut of consumer oriented messages (Pop Art) and political propaganda which the mass media feeds us daily in the interests of corporate profit and governmental psychological manipulation. So I am incredibly energized by the practice of digital painting because it is – in my opinion - where important things are happening in art today. This is so because digital painting is a precise reaction to critical things as they are now in the wired information age while maintaining the position of reflective criticality found in the long tradition of silent and immobile painted surfaces.

Elsa Ayache: *Is your painting irreplaceable? Why?*

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes. Through my painting's flatness one encounters a perceptual area of virtual space/sex/death: extensively layered, nuanced, cadenced and unfathomable - where the primal trepidation of losing control dominates.

Elsa Ayache: *Is digital irreplaceable? Why?*

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes. Though my viral work is certainly heading for presentation in virtual reality - where immersion is total and where the viewer/user is free to navigate his or her way through the deep perceptual space which my art suggests - I plan also to continue the presentation of silent, still viral images robotically painted on canvas for certain very obvious reasons: contemplation possibilities offered to the viewer, the beauty of natural light, the suggested (therefore more actively imagined) viral immersion by use of large scale dimensions, plus issues of permanency and warmth.

In this respect the viral painting's unique distinction is much less in what painting does or attempts, but in how it does it.

Elsa Ayache: *When looking at your work and contemporary art practices, how do you analyze the relationships between painting and digital?*

Joseph Nechvatal: What is valued in my practice of digital painting is the practice of so-called “pure” visuality over material texture when it comes to painting. This value is manifest through the strict flatness achieved in my computer-robotic assisted paintings’ paint application where an air-gun/air-nozzle pigment delivery system driven by a computer program sprays and stains the canvas support. There is no 3D texture other than the minuscule one provided by the canvas weave. There is no *croute*, as the French say (crust). Thus my art creates a single case in point based on the essential nature of digital virtuality. Making the concept of the virtual visually perceivable in the actual terms of natural light and real time is achieved through a process of creating a visual integration – a process that I have termed the viractual, which is a state neither pure nor impure – but complete.

Elsa Ayache: *Complementarity? competition? Progress? Overtaking?
Continuity?*

Joseph Nechvatal: In aiming to succeed within the essential characteristics of viractuality, I have come to work over the last four years on the subject of the hermaphrodite. Specifically, a hermaphroditic pre- bifurcation moment in human development called oogenesics. Oogenesics is a moment in the development of the fertilized egg where both female and male potentiality exists simultaneously. This moment of potentiality exemplifies the viractual concept brilliantly - indeed virtuality, viractuality and code have myth status in terms of my oogenetic hermaphroditism. The hermaphrodite is an important viractual image in that it suggests the truth in life that a thing can be both one thing and its opposite: that two opposites can exist simultaneously and not cancel each other out.

Elsa Ayache: *Wrong question?*

Joseph Nechvatal: No. Peacefully sustained conflict can be the agent of transformation and the creator of something new. Peacefully sustained conflict engages the audience in a play of contradiction and excess that encourages active critical thought and moves us away from sole positions of passive emotion.

Elsa Ayache: *If you had to define Digital's contributions to the painting, what would it be?*

Joseph Nechvatal: This question is a reflection on the electronic flux with which I work – a flux into which its results may or may not be subsequently transformed by viral a-life infections. If an oogenetic moment is launched into the “actual world” by being painted it performs a peculiar incident in its own right. Through this working method I avoid seeking the pursuit of endless electronic stimulation and rather seek out satiation. Such satiation supplies me with a chain of pleasures in which the delights of the body are not subordinated to the virtual - but rather dominate and hence shape the virtual towards the living – yet classical - ends of painting and its functions.

Elsa Ayache: What is Painting's contributions to digital?

Joseph Nechvatal: One of the things that painting does pretty well is present viral viractual imagery that lingers for contemplation. Painting can present mutually exclusive conditions at the same time. If computer animation can be compared to a reel of tape, then painting can be compared to random access memory. That all the simultaneous viractual information is available all the time is something that digital painting has going for it. Too often we concentrate on this still quality as a weakness and make futile attempts to bring the element of time into an art form that is strongest when presenting a timeless and simultaneous image to contemplation.

On the other hand, computers, I find, can give more significance to trial-and-error than simple freedom of choice, due to their incredible speed. As such, they can draw correspondences with the creative patterns of consciousness and so can blow stale imagination away. This has been my experience at least.

Elsa Ayache: Have you ever questioned the (your) involvement in painting work in a context that claimed the death of the painting or the impossibility of this medium?

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes. For me, the digital has brought back from the dead the practice of painting.